MODULE 5: PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

EPA defines public involvement as the full range of activities that are used to engage the American people in decision-making processes. Public involvement is a progression that starts with outreach to build awareness and interest. It evolves to information exchange, through collaboration and recommendation, and finally to agreement and decision-making. The public may include private individuals, environmental or other advocacy groups, environmental justice groups, indigenous peoples, minority and ethnic groups, business and industrial interests (including small businesses), elected and appointed public officials, trade associations, and research and governmental associations.

Public involvement in the development and implementation of innovations is fundamental to ensure a transparent process that fosters trust and works to enhance the relationships between the public, the regulated community and the regulators. Public participation can benefit the innovation, the regulated entity, the regulator and the public by increasing awareness about innovation and their environmental benefits and impacts, developing measurable and verifiable environmental results, preventing shifts in risk burdens to disadvantaged populations, ensuring worker safety and protections are maintained, and enhancing the level of information available to the public. By involving the public early in an innovation,, practitioners will have the benefit of the public's guidance, experience and input. Not everyone may choose to be an active participant in the innovation, however, the goal should be to provide opportunities for people to engage at every point along the progression. Individuals and groups should decide for themselves whether, when, and how to participate. EPA issued a new Public Involvement Policy in May 2003, which contains useful tips on implementing effective public involvement strategies and helps define different stakeholder groups. The policy also provides useful tools to assist practitioners with the public involvement process at the public involvement website, http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/intro.htm.

I. Stakeholder Participation

The first step in stakeholder involvement is to identify key participants who may be interested in, or affected by, the innnovation. Depending on the nature of the innovation and who is implementing the innovation, stakeholders may include members of the regulated community, community groups, environmental or other advocacy groups, governmental entities, trade associations, and others. Innovation practitioners will also want to consult with EPA, State, Tribal, and local government partners. To alert the public in low-income and minority communities of the opportunity to become involved in an innovation, practitioners should consider using various media such as advertising in local newspapers, making announcements on radio stations, and communicating through local institutions such as religious establishments. Please see EPA's Public Involvement Policy for more specific information and tools on how to involve different stakeholder groups and stakeholder needs. The key questions to ask are:

1. Who are the key stakeholders?
2. Have State, Tribal, and local government partners been consulted?
3. If applicable, what specific strategies are being considered to ensure the participation of low-income and minority communities?
4. What is the pre-innovation "baseline" for public involvement and accountability against which progress will be measured?
5. How does the innovation address regulatory requirements (Federal/State/local/Tribal) for public involvement?
6. What changes to the transparency in decision-making (for the regulator and/or the regulatee) and the degree of stakeholder/public leverage result from the innovation?

II. Collaborative Dialogue Approaches

The best means of involving stakeholders in the development and implementation of an innovation depends on the number and diversity of the parties to be consulted, the geographic impacts of the innovation, the resources available to engage in consultative processes, and the type of communication networks generally used by particular stakeholders. Constructive dialogue approaches may include outreach activities, information exchange, the solicitation of stakeholder advice or recommendations, technical workgroups, web-based dialogues, Citizen Advisory Committees, and stakeholder negotiations. Collaborative processes encourage an interactive and dynamic discussion that may lead to greater clarification of the issues and consensus among the parties.

7. What are the best means of involving stakeholders in the development of the innovation?
8. What types of collaborative processes or other participatory practices will be used to solicit input?

III. Availability of Information

For information to be readily available to stakeholders, it must be both understandable and accessible. Innovation practitioners must prepare "plain English" (or other appropriate language) summaries and fact sheets to facilitate comprehension of otherwise complex environmental concepts. Communication materials must engage participants at all levels – from members of the general public to experts in the field – and make available materials such as innovative permits, progress reports, annual reports, emissions and/or effluent data, etc. Materials must be translated when appropriate so that diverse populations have access to the information. In addition, innovation practitioners must seek ways to ensure the broadest participation feasible and should work with all identified partners to enhance information distribution to all potentially interested parties. Public information meetings can provide a valuable and interactive means for communication with interested stakeholders.

9. Is information regarding the innovation readily available to stakeholders?
10. What changes to the type, scope, amount, quality (accuracy, relevance), and timing of information available to the public result from the innovation?

IV. Stakeholder Feedback

Stakeholder involvement needs to be carefully planned to allow sufficient time for discussion of the relevant issues with the stakeholders and to incorporate their feedback in the innovation. How stakeholder feedback is used in the innovation should be communicated and explained to participants from the start of the innovation, if possible. The innovation practitioner should anticipate both positive and negative feedback from stakeholders. The feedback may be content-based or about the innovative process; and the feedback from one stakeholder group may be at odds with another group. In order to understand the feedback, work to resolve conflicts, and strive for consensus, the innovation practitioner may use the collaborative processes described above.

11. At what stage in the innovation process will stakeholders be involved to ensure participation and an opportunity to incorporate feedback?
12. To what extent has the practitioner been successful in obtaining feedback from the public about the innovation's design and/or implementation?

V. Responsiveness to Stakeholder Priorities and Concerns

Innovation demands a high level of responsiveness to the priorities and concerns of stakeholders. To address the greater level of scrutiny experienced by innovation, practitioners need to develop a process that addresses the major concerns of stakeholders. If resources are available, academic experts may

provide objective technical assistance to stakeholder groups or a facilitator can be used to make sure that all concerns are heard and addressed. It is important at the outset of an innovation to determine what resources will be available to address stakeholder issues.

13. Has the practitioner developed a process to address the major concerns of stakeholders?
14. Is technical or financial assistance available to facilitate the participation of particular groups of stakeholders?
15. In your opinion, how do stakeholders view their involvement in the innovation?